

RECOVERING A LOST VISION:

CHRISTIANS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED AT CHRIST CHURCH CATHEDRAL, OTTAWA.

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BY

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It happened in 1973, on the 1st August. and it happened in a very poor corner of the State of Uttar Pradesh in India. Flanking some 15 villages was a vast, green swathe of primeval forest, rich in tall, old aristocratic trees intertwined with myriads of creepers. The forest was home to some of the finest and rarest wild life in all India.

A few weeks before the villagers had been visited by a group of corporate men in the lumber business. They had marked out an area of the forest for felling and they need the labour of the male villagers. The kind of wages they were offering was well beyond anything the villagers had ever been offered before; even beyond

their dreams. The expectation was reaching a peak in the villages as the day of logging drew near.

Well before the sun was up the men were on their way already hearing the crash of timber and the tinkle of rupees. As the trees began to loom large before them, some of them loomed oddly. As the darkness melted into the dawn they saw why. Their women, wives, daughters, mothers, sisters, aunts, some of them no more than 13, some of them no less than 70, were chained to those trees most destined for the axe.

The men cajoled, threatened, even used their fists upon the women. No effect. They got their employers to reason with the women. Still no effect. Then the state governor arrived oozing soothe words and fair promises. And still the women stood firm. One of them summed up their protest in words simple and telling: if these trees live so will our children; if they die our children die with them.

The governor realised that there was nothing to do but negotiate. And the women stated their terms: they would choose which trees would be cut and which were not -and how many would be cut. When Mrs. Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, was told about the womens' stand she sent her representative to congratulate them. Something very healthy, she said, was beginning to happen in India.

21 years later, in 1994, what those women started has put down roots and spread like a forest all across India. The Chipkoe or tree hugging movement is a large network of voluntary organisations mostly composed of women. It is so politically significant that both the state and federal governments of India consult it when projects that affect the environment are being planned. Its voice is powerful in the land and its political savvy is awesome.

There are many lessons for us Christians in that story. I shall pick just three. First, those women had an unerring sense how interdependent humankind and nature are on each other. Second, poor though they were, they thought of future generations, not just of their own. Third, they did not let their littleness, their poverty and their powerlessness prevent them from doing what the thought was right.

They were a living validation of the saying: " There are no little people, only people who do not yet know how big they are."

Those women were all Hindus. And they took their stand at a time when the vast majority of Christians around the world took little heed of how humankind was rampantly endangering the life of the planet. Christians should have been the leaders, rather than the belated followers, of environmentalist movements. But as has happened before in history, people of other religions and

frequently of no religion have made us look with new eyes at the fundamentals of our faith.

God moves in mysterious ways his people to inform.

To look with new eyes is see what was always there but concealed from us by the varnish of lopsided interpretation. One of the fundamentals most concealed is the right relationship between ourselves and nature. For the last three centuries blatantly, and for four centuries before that implicitly, Christians have looked upon nature as the slave of humankind. Slaves exist to be exploited, their only value is their service to their master. They are there not just to be used but to be used up.

Those who gloried in that interpretation included theologians, philosophers, scientists, the captains of the industrial revolution, the wizards of technology, settlers in the Americas, colonial officials of the European empires, and all those who believe that the best motto in life is " I consume therefore I

am." They were all convinced that the Book of Genesis was on their side. It does say: " Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the face of the earth".

But to legitimately interpret any text in the Bible we must set it in its context.

The books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy give us the context to that passage and the clue to what the word "dominion" means. If you read them you will find specific instructions that on every seventh day and for the whole of every seventh year both the land and the animals must be free from human intervention.

Why? So that they may recover their primal freshness and fully express the glory of their Creator.

For humans and the natural world the seventh day and the seventh year were times when a sense of wonder was more important than a

sense of work; peace took precedence over pace; and communing came before controlling.

The Sabbath reminded men and women that the planet was entirely God's creation. It was also God's property - not to be crushed, despoiled, battered, polluted or extinguished. "The earth is the Lord's and all the fullness thereof" says the 19th Psalm. We are not given it. We are loaned it. We therefore have no God given right to abuse it. Incidentally, even the wild animals were to be given their quota of food, particularly in times of drought - which shows an extraordinary understanding of their role in maintaining the delicate balance of the ecology.

So the word that was translated as "dominion" clearly means neither domination nor exploitation. It means "having responsibility for the welfare of nature." Nowhere else in the ancient world do we find such clear and elaborate instructions for respecting and nurturing the natural world.

You know, we have lived for along time in the comfortable assumption that in the creation story we are the climax. Look at it again and you will find that it is not we but the Sabbath that is the crown of creation. On the Sabbath God stopped his labours, stood back and surveyed the full blown magnificence of what He had made. He hallowed it: which means He made it prime time for his creatures to rejoice in Him and in their own being.

I think all of us here know the canticle we sing during Lent at Matins - the Benedicite. " All ye works of the Lord bless ye the Lord; praise Him and magnify Him for ever" It is an exuberant invitation to all creatures to rejoice in their Creator and it makes no distinctions between them. Humans, animals, mountains, rivers, plants, the stars, are all included. (If this present cold spell continues we shall sing with special emphasis " O, you ice and snow bless you the Lord")

They are all included because they are all seen as living entities -- alive through and through. Not inert things, not dead matter. All pulsating with God's spirit. As Psalm 104 puts it:

" When you hide your face they are terrified. When you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your spirit they are created and you renew the face of the earth."

In the Bible, God's life is manifested through the creation.

God's creatures that are mentioned in the Benedicite are not our slaves, nor our objects, but our colleagues in a cosmic fellowship. Fellowship means the condition of harmony and harmony rules out insensitive, rapacious and destructive behaviour.

In the last 200 years we humans, particularly in the West, have abandoned all attempts at harmony with nature. Especially, since the industrial revolution we have decided that nature

exists simply to be exploited by us. If we are Christians we assume that God gave nature inexhaustible purifying powers. We could strip mine the creation, treat it like a garbage dump or a sink. No matter. It will simply bounce back, resilient and recuperative.

We are learning daily how fragile nature is. Our scientists keep reminding us that the natural world is awesomely creative and ingenious but it is delicate and sensitive organism - definitely not a machine. It is a once-for-all endowment and we can destroy it.

The prophets of the Old Testament profoundly understood what happens when harmony between God, humankind and nature is disrupted. We become alienated from our Creator, we become alienated from nature and we become alienated from ourselves. The result of that triple state of alienation is unbridled

selfishness in which consumption blots out compassion and competition is untempered by community.

Whenever they diagnosed rampant injustice in Israel the prophets saw it as the refusal of their people to keep the Covenant with Yahweh. The covenant laid strong emphasis on justice as a regulating principle in society. The God of the covenant was portrayed as being deeply concerned with the oppressed and marginalised groups, with the weak and the dispossessed. It was his command that the Hebrew people be fair and equitable in their dealings with their neighbours, with strangers, servants and slaves.

But what is astonishing about their perceptiveness is their insistence that whenever there was injustice between humans it was always accompanied by breakdown of relations between humans and nature. People at war within themselves, at war with their fellows were also at war with God's creation. The signs of that

broken condition were seen in the environment: famine stalked the land, the waters dried up, the animals died, the trees and grasses withered. In short, in the prophets' vision, environmental catastrophe and social injustice were apocalyptic twins.

Wonderfully, the prophets' message speaks to our time as much as it spoke to their own: the earth can not afford either the escalating greed of the rich or the deepening desperation of the poor. Both put impossibly heavy strains on its life support systems.

The Old Testament Lesson we heard a few moments ago give us the other side of the picture. Isaiah describes the manifestations of a just society, of harmony among humans and harmony between humans and God. As you read it you notice the result of those two harmonies is the third: harmonious relationships between nature and humankind and within nature itself both symbolised by by this

picture" "The lion shall lie down with the lamb and a child will lead them."

The prophets understood what it has taken us so long to appreciate: the world is a web. All things are intimately interconnected. The breaking of some strands weakens the whole web. Some scientists even say that killing a butterfly damages a star. A collapse of harmony in one area shows itself right across the board. Both Nature and justice are seamless robes. And the consequences of eroding either cannot be localised. At the end of the 20th century we are learning that with a vengeance.

Jesus was a whole man, every page of the Gospels tell us that. He lived in harmony with God, with himself and with nature . The story of his birth vividly depicts his umbilical with the natural world: Animals witnesses his coming forth from the womb. A star announced his birth; and his first visitors were earthy folk whose life depended on animals- shepherds.

His parables show an acute observation and love of nature. He was concerned when sparrows died. And he must have appalled many of his hearers when he said that King Solomon's legendary grandeur could not compare with the beauty of the wild poppies of the field. The night before he was crucified he spent in a garden in conversation with God. And his crucifixion ? A stark statement of the effects of evil on God, humankind and nature: a dead man on a dead tree.

The Resurrection takes us back to a garden - the life of nature and the life of the Lord intertwined. In St. John's account of the event Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for the gardener.

Technically, she was wrong. Cosmically she was right. A good gardener marries the artist in each of us to the artistry of nature. The result is an epiphany in which the genius of both nature and humans for form, colour, grace, symmetry and mystery are rapturously revealed.

St. Paul is lyrical about Jesus being the cosmic principle that fuses both the gardens and the gardeners. He wrote: " For by him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.....He is before all things and by him all things hold together..... for god was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether things on earth or in heaven.."

In other words Jesus unites every natural and historical process, all forces, forms, elements both material and spiritual, and all life both animate and inanimate. He came to restore to wholeness not just humankind but the natural world. And the whole cosmos will share in the final liberation of humanity from death and decay as both enter eternal life. The natural world, the New Testament tells us, will not simply disappear. It will be so transformed that it becomes the perfect habitat for God and

humanity to share that continuous flowering of potential which we
call eternal life.

If nature is to share our destiny then it must also share our
fellowship.

Gerald Manley Hopkins the priest poet of the late 19 century
summed all this up in a poem which many of have read at one time
or another:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness like the ooze of oil

crushed. Why do men then not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

and wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

there lives the deepest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs-

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent world

Broods with warm breast and with ah, bright wings.

The freshness he describes as deep down things is the immense creative impulse both in nature and ourselves. The tree hugging women of India showed that they had it and they wanted it treasured and preserved in nature. We Christians have it too. But it is not enough to have it deep down. We must let the Holy Spirit call it forth in powerful activity, in planning, in strategic networking, in social and political programs to ensure that this beautiful planet, God's masterpiece, is recognised by

all peoples as our only home and treated with the loving care we
give to a home.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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